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STATE PASS USTR FOR JIM MURPHY

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SUBJECT: ROQUEFORT CALLS ON EMBASSY PARIS

REF: Paris 62

¶1. A delegation of Roquefort cheese producers and political representatives presented a letter (and several rounds of cheese) to the Embassy January 21, imploring the new U.S. administration not to implement the recently announced decision to increase duties on Roquefort cheese to 300 percent. The delegation was headed by Martin Malvy, Socialist President of the Midi-Pyrenees Region (and former Minister for Trade from 1984 to 1986); Socialist Senator Alain Fauconnier; Regional Council member Jean-Luc Malet and Mayor of St. Rome de Cernon Pierre Pantanella, and Roquefort producers Laurent Reversat, of the French farmers' union "Confederation Paysanne," and Claudette Vials of the "Syndicat Roquefort."

¶2. The delegation focused on the disproportionate impact the increased tariff would have on France's renowned soft blue cheese: loss of the U.S. export market and the potential failure of many small Roquefort producers in mountainous and agriculturally marginal rural area. France exports 400 tons of Roquefort to the U.S. annually (2 percent of total production). Malvy expressed his "shock" that Roquefort cheese, an emblem of France, was a "hostage of a debate" that had nothing to do with the Midi-Pyrenees region that prided itself on the quality of its 104 agricultural products as well as its close ties to the U.S.

¶3. "It is not our conflict," Laurent Reversat commented and noted that it had required "huge financial efforts" to export Roquefort when duties had been raised to 100 percent, and exports would be unsustainable at 300 percent, particularly in light of the current economic context. Reversat, who is closely aligned with anti-globalization activist Jose Bove, told journalists that Roquefort producers were considering taking action to protest the new tariffs. He noted that 2009 is the 10 year anniversary of the first act of destruction of a McDonalds restaurant in France.

¶4. Socialist Senator Fauconnier said the U.S. action was completely disproportionate." He added that France's concern with American meat products, particularly hormone beef and "chlorine-treated" chicken, was a far larger and complex "social and cultural problem for France."

¶5. Responding to French concerns, Econ Minister Counselor agreed to accept the letter (septel) and explained the context of this long running dispute and that the U.S. has been extremely patient but is entitled to retaliate under WTO rules, emphasizing that Roquefort cheese was among many products on the revised tariff list. He stated that the best possible solution for affected agricultural producers in France is to ensure expanded market access for US meat products, hormone treated or otherwise.

